

# **Center for Youth Leadership**

Why wait for someone else to make a difference?

## **Connecticut Assembly's Select Committee on Children Testimony, February 23, 2010**

### **Introduction**

Good afternoon Senator Musto, Representative Urban, and members of the committee. We have a special greeting for Senator Boucher, who has worked with us on legislation about teen dating violence and human trafficking, and Representative Mioli, who participates in the child abuse public awareness events we hold every year at the State Capitol.

My name is Laura Knox and I am from the Center for Youth Leadership, which is based at Brien McMahon High School in Norwalk. Joining me is Sky Loth, who is also a member of the Center.

On behalf of the 223 student activists at the Center for Youth Leadership, we are here to testify in support of HB 5041, which calls for cross-reporting of child abuse and animal cruelty, and SB 153, which is the safe harbor bill for exploited children. We'll talk first about cross-reporting.

### **HB 5041**

#### **Cross-Reporting of Child Abuse and Animal Cruelty**

Child abuse prevention has been the focus of our public awareness and social change campaigns since 1999. The fact that the link between animal cruelty and child abuse is just the fifth subtopic that we've added to our work since then points to its importance for us.

Since 2008 we've been working on bringing cross-training and cross-reporting to animal control officers and Department of Children and Families caseworkers in lower Fairfield County. To that end, we followed the outcomes of the meetings that were

conducted by Representative Urban's task force on the circle of violence. Our research is ongoing, as is our public awareness campaign that reaches more than 1,000 people my age every year. We've met with animal control officers in Norwalk and Bridgeport. And we've met with senior investigative caseworkers from the Norwalk-Stamford office of the Department of Children and Families.

We were compelled to adopt this issue for many reasons, but I'll give you just four:

1. Overwhelming evidence of the link between animal cruelty and child abuse. Of the scores of studies we reviewed, one stood out. It was a study of nearly 1,000 college students that assessed their exposure to violence; 62 percent who witnessed or committed animal cruelty as a child had also experienced child abuse or domestic violence.
2. The finding of the Humane Society of the United States that 20 to 31 percent of the intentional animal cruelty cases every year are committed by people my age. The stories and statistics are no better closer to home. We were horrified by the countless stories we heard from classmates who use pellet guns to shoot small animals. And according to the animal control officer in Bridgeport, of the 550 animal cruelty cases his office investigates every year, half are committed by teens 13-16 years of age.
3. The finding of Representative Urban's task force that of the 1,400 cases of animal cruelty that were brought before Connecticut's courts from 2004 through 2007, 84 percent were dismissed, with nothing done to assess other acts of violence. This brings to mind the attempts by legislators in California and Tennessee to create animal offender registries similar to those for sex offenders.
4. But we were really moved to act for the following reason. Every week for the past six years our members have volunteered at a domestic violence safe house and at a crisis center for children who have been abused. We cannot begin to tell you how many times we have heard 5-6-7 year old children talk about how their abusive parent kicks, punches, and slaps the family pet just as he kicks, punches, and slaps mommy; or the number of drawings we've seen that show a child hurting an animal because "...it seems like fun" or because "...I saw my daddy do it;" Or the number of times during play that a child will include some sort of violent behavior towards an imaginary animal.

Although we support HB 5041, we're concerned about how it will be put into practice. We want it to work, so here are five things we think you should consider, if you have not already done so.

1. Will DCF caseworkers and animal control officers ask about animal cruelty and child abuse as a matter of routine, or will it be based on a casual visual observation only. For example, will DCF caseworkers add a screen for animal cruelty to the screens it uses to assess domestic violence, substance abuse and other issues when investigating a case? Will the software that DCF uses have to be adjusted to accommodate caseworkers' notes about animal cruelty?
2. According to the bill, if a DCF caseworker notes animal cruelty during a home visit, he/she will need to report it. Let's say the caseworker also suspects child abuse in the family. How will the caseworker report the suspected animal cruelty without compromising the family's identity?
3. Has anyone assessed how HB 5041 will affect the training and work of animal control officers? We did not see any reference to this in the language of the bill.
4. Who will put together the training that we assume animal control officers and caseworkers will need to complete?
5. Let's say HB 5041 becomes law. Who will design and implement an evaluation to see how the law is working three-six-nine months after it is enacted?

We will continue to work to bring cross-reporting of animal cruelty and child abuse to lower Fairfield County. Thanks for the opportunity to share our thoughts with you.

## **SB 153: Safe Harbor for Exploited Children**

As Laura said, my name is Sky Loth and on behalf of the 223 members of the Center for Youth Leadership I am here in support of SB 153, Safe Harbor for Exploited Children.

You are a runaway or throwaway kid. No one will take you in - no aunts, no uncles. A friend's family thought about helping you, but then they thought again. You hit the streets with the clothes on your back and a slim sense of how you're going to make it.

Some guy calls to you from his car. You ignore him. He calls to you again two days later, and four days after that. The car looks nice. He seems friendly. You're hungry and you need a place to sleep. Your gut tells you that stepping off the curb and into his car may not be the best thing. But your gut also needs food. So, you step off the curb and into a

world of servicing men, none of whom you know, none of whom care who you are. The only one who cares is the pimp who trafficks you from man to man, location to location, with the occasional beating thrown in.

This girl from a city in Connecticut actually survived longer than some. According to the National Incidence Studies of Missing, Runaway and Throwaway Children, of the estimated 1.5 million children who will run away from home this year, tens of thousands will spend time working for sexual predators and selling their bodies on the streets; many will be lured into prostitution within 48 hours of leaving home.

I have never been trafficked, nor have any of my friends, but we are concerned for teens in Connecticut who have, especially if SB 153 does not become law. We have been working on trafficking since 2006, which is when we hosted a workshop that featured experts from Save the Children, the U.S. Attorney's Office, the Permanent Commission on the Status of Women and Micheline Slattery. Micheline's story as a restavec (or slave) in Haiti is what compelled our members to act.

Since then we have continued our research, led scores of public awareness activities, and made a conscious decision to focus on the trafficking of children and teens in the United States. It would have been easy to focus on international trafficking, but we were concerned about perpetuating the myth, at least among people my age, that trafficking does not happen right here in Connecticut.

We have come to the conclusion that states need to stop charging children - some as young as 11-12 years old - with prostitution and locking them up. Why re-traumatize a child who has been sexually exploited for someone else's gain? Connecticut is not alone in this approach. The Barton Child Law and Policy Clinic at the Emory University School of Law found that nearly all states allow children of just about any age to be prosecuted for prostitution - even though children are too young to consent to sex with adults. We believe every state should provide sexually exploited children born in this country with the same protections and services that are routinely granted to international victims.

We were pleased to see that SB 153 has taken into account the farsighted legislation enacted in New York, under which children arrested for prostitution would be presumed to be victims of sexual trafficking and given protection and social services. We do not see any benefit to a teen - or the State of Connecticut - if a teen is locked up for a crime that she was coerced into committing. As many people have noted, charging children with the crime of prostitution "...compounds the harm done to them and deepens feelings of guilt and worthlessness that haunts victims of sexual exploitation."

Center for Youth Leadership  
Testimony in support of HB 5041, SB 153

Keeping children and teens out of the criminal justice system and hooking them up with services is in keeping with a growing movement in southern Fairfield County. For example, our sister program in Stamford runs a juvenile review board, as does the City of Bridgeport, and our hometown of Norwalk runs a street level outreach program to teens. Granted, neither deals with hardcore issues like trafficking, but their stated purpose of keeping teens out of jail and referring them to community based care is something that should be afforded to children and teens who have been trafficked.

Finally, we agree with our friends at Love 146 and the Barnaba Institute that the language in SB 153 should be changed to bring it in line with Connecticut's Raise the Age legislation and to insure that prosecuting a child for prostitution is not an option. The last thing someone my age needs is a criminal record for something that I was forced to do against my will; that will stigmatize me; and that may compromise my ability to heal, reconnect with my family, and to find a job or enroll in school.

Thank you.

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February 23, 2010